Art in Translation

ISSN: (Print) 1756-1310 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfat20

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To cite this article: Frances Fowle (2017) Introduction: Nordic Artists' Colonies 1870–1914 (Part 1), Art in Translation, 9:2, 183-189, DOI: 10.1080/17561310.2017.1339253

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2017.1339253

Published online: 08 Aug 2017.

Art in Translation, 2017
Volume 9, Issue 2, pp. 183–189, https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2017.1339253

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Introduction: Nordic Artists' Colonies 1870–1914 (Part 1)

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Toward the end of the nineteenth century the practice of painting out of doors during the summer months became the norm for many young Nordic artists. Armed with paint boxes, tubes, and easels, they left the city and headed for the countryside, seeking the shimmering light of the coast or the cooling streams of the forest. Their subjects included rural workers, fisherman hauling in their nets, or the sheer beauty of the landscape. Their paintings reflected strong socialist values, as well as health, well-being, and a nostalgia for a rural way of life that was fast disappearing. The works produced in Nordic artists' colonies in the 1870s and 1880s were also underpinned by a desire to engage with the European avant-garde, as well as a strong sense of national identity, which demanded a focus on

myth, folklore, craftwork, and—especially in Norway and Denmark—an emphasis on the figure of the peasant farmer or *bonde*. Images such as Michael Anker's *Will He Round the Point?* (1879, Skagens Museum, Skagen) or Erik Werenskiold's *Peasant Burial* of 1885 (National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo) emphasized the harshness of the Scandinavian way of life and the sense of a community tied to the land, as well as the remote beauty of their surroundings.

In the nineteenth century the term "Scandinavian" was invoked to describe art and artists from right across the Nordic territories. However, as Annika Waenerberg has discussed, the concept of a "Nordic" landscape needs to be scrutinized.[1] The Nordic countries comprise Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and Finland, together with associated territories such as Greenland, the Faroes, and the Åland islands. Very often this larger geographical area is distinguished from Scandinavia, a term most generally used to designate the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and sometimes comprising southwest Finland. On the other hand, the geological area known as "Fennoscandia" encompasses parts of Russia but does not include Denmark. The picture is complicated by the changes of regime that took place in the nineteenth century. In 1864 Denmark ceded Schleswig Holstein to Germany and was conscious of its reduced status, having lost Norway to Sweden earlier in the century.[2] Norway's union with Sweden would not be dissolved until 1905, while Finland was not only dominated by Swedish language and culture but had been annexed to Russia since 1809. In summary, the formation of Nordic artists' colonies in the 1870s and 1880s coincided with a period of fervent national revival, and the works produced in Skagen, Fleskum, Lysaker, Varberg, Önningeby, Tuusula, and elsewhere need to be viewed in this light.

The late nineteenth century was also a time of active cultural engagement with the European avant-garde. At the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1878, Scandinavian art was dismissed as provincial and inward-looking: "… art vegetates in Denmark, lives slightly in Sweden and doesn't exist at all in Norway," wrote one critic.[3] During the 1880s, however, more and more Nordic artists began to travel to France, where they absorbed the lessons of Salon Naturalists such as Jules Bastien-Lepage and Jean-Charles Cazin. Bastien-Lepage's work, in particular, was admired by the "foreign" artists working in Paris and at Grez-sur-Loing in the late 1870s and early 1880s. His influence is evident in the naturalist style practiced by British and American artists of the period, as well as Nordic artists from Carl Larsson (1853–1919) to Harriet Backer (1845–1932) and the Finn Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931).[4] Spokesmen for the "new art" included Erik Werenskiold (1855–1938), who headed up the artists' colony at Fleskum, near Christiania (Oslo), and Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), who shared a studio in Paris in the late 1870s with the American artist Julian Alden Weir. By the mid-1880s Naturalism had been adopted by Nordic painters as their national style, prompting artists in Sweden to rebel against the Germanic-inspired academicism of the Royal Academy

of Fine Arts and, in 1886, to form the Swedish Artists' Union.[5] Meanwhile Norwegian artists, obliged to train in Düsseldorf and Karlsruhe under the academic artist Hans Gude, began to question the "identity" of their work.

The proliferation of Nordic artists' colonies in the late nineteenth century thus resulted largely from the new naturalist emphasis on painting out of doors, and this was aided—and to a certain extent abetted—by changes in technology. The extension of the railway system provided ease of access for artists as well as visitors from the city, seeking the restorative air of the countryside and the sensation of being immersed in "unspoiled" nature. The first French colony at Barbizon in the Forest of Fontainebleau benefited from a rail extension to nearby Avon as early as 1849, reducing the seven-hour journey time by coach from Paris to about two hours.[6] However, the inevitable consequence of this improvement in the transport system was the development of tourism and the need for artists to find ever more remote spots. Consequently, some Nordic colonies, such as those at Skagen and at Önningeby in the Åland islands, could be reached only by a long and arduous route by boat and coach[7]; while others, such as Fleskum, even if they were close to the capital, were not accessible by rail.

Barbizon was in many ways the prototypical artists' colony.[8] It provided not only picturesque views and trails for the urban visitor, but inexpensive accommodation for the painter, and the promise of a supportive network of like-minded artists, eager to exchange ideas.[9] There are several Swedish accounts of the colony at nearby Grez-sur-Loing, which provide a fascinating counterpoint to American Will Hicok Low's *A Chronicle of Friendships 1873–1900*, published in 1908.[10] We learn that there were two guest houses to accommodate the artists who gathered at Grez in the 1880s: the rather bohemian Hôtel Chevillon (formerly the Hôtel de la Marne), which opened in 1860, and the more sober Pension Laurent (formerly the Hôtel Beau Séjour), which opened in 1878. Both offered competitive rates, in contrast to Skagen which, due to its remote location, was not particularly cheap and boasted only one hotel, Brøndum's guesthouse. This was too expensive for some artists, obliging them to seek alternative accommodation among the more enterprising members of the local community.[11]

Most Nordic colonies flourished only during the summer months but some areas such as Tuusula in Finland established more of a community, to the extent that some artists built their own villas and stayed there all the year round. Through living and eating together the artists formed strong friendships and, even if the women in the colony very often became the providers, as, for example, at Fleskum and Önningeby, they were also taken seriously as professional artists and benefitted from the wider networks of their male companions. There was also more of a sense of cooperation and collaboration at communities such as Fleskum, Önningeby, and Tuusula, where women played a major role. Nevertheless, most artists' colonies had at their head a charismatic male individual to

provide some kind of guidance or focus: Carl Larsson led the group of Scandinavian artists at Grez-sur-Loing; Michael Anker (1849–1927) and Peder Severin Krøyer (1851–1909) were the major figures at the artists' colony at Skagen in Denmark; Erik Werenskiold was at the center of the Lysaker circle in Norway; and the colony at Varberg in Sweden formed under the guidance of Richard Bergh (1858–1919) and Karl Nordström (1855–1923). These artists were all of the same generation, mostly born in the 1850s.

When they began to head up these communities, these men were still young and full of energy and inspiration. Several had worked in colonies in France and, having benefited from the sense of community, as well as working out of doors, were eager to repeat the experiment in their native country. Krøyer, for example, painted *en plein air* at Pont-Aven and Concarneau in 1879 before going on to establish himself at Skagen in northern Denmark; Christian Krohg (1852–1925) spent five summers at Skagen between 1879 and 1888, but was also at Grez in 1881–2; while Nordström, Bergh, and Nils Kreuger (1858–1930) spent a period at Grez before going on to form the influential colony at Varberg in 1893.[12] Even women artists such as Kitty Kielland (1843–1914) and Harriet Backer worked at Grez and Pont-Aven, as well as Fleskum.

Publications on Nordic Artists' Colonies

The existing literature in English on Nordic artists' colonies is sparse. The most comprehensive survey remains Michael Jacobs' *The Good and Simple Life: Artists Colonies in Europe and America* (1985), which focuses not only on the Scandinavian community at Grez-sur-Loing in France, but devotes an entire chapter to the colony at Skagen, the earliest and also the largest and most important of the Nordic colonies. Skagen was the only Scandinavian colony to attract artists from outside their native country—Norwegians such as Skredsvig, Krøyer, and Eilif Peterssen (1852–1928), the Swedes Oscar Björck (1860–1929) and Johan Krouthén (1858–1932), and even the Scottish artist R.A.M. ("Bob") Stevenson, a first cousin of the writer Robert Louis Stevenson. Skagen remains the best known of the colonies outside Scandinavia and has been thoroughly examined in Patricia Berman's *In Another Light: Danish Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (2007)[13] as well as Brian Dudley Barrett's *Artists on the Edge: The Rise of Coastal Artists' Colonies, 1880–1920* (2010). It plays a more minor role in Nina Lübbren's seminal study, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe 1870–1910* (2001),[14] which brilliantly explodes the "myth" of the colony but has a distinct bias toward French, German, and, to a certain extent, Dutch and English communities. Today the activities of the artists' colony at Skagen are preserved and presented to the public by the Skagens Museum, which was founded in 1908 in the dining room of Brøndums hotel by Krøyer and fellow artists Michael Anker and Laurits Tuxen (1853–1927). The literature on Skagen is therefore supplemented in the current volume

by two first-hand accounts, introduced by Mette Bøgh Jensen, curator at the Skagens Museum. The opening article, by the Danish writer and painter Holger Drachmann (1846–1908), relives the experience of arriving at Skagen. This is juxtaposed with an article by Christian Krohg, who views Skagen from an outsider's viewpoint.

Apart from Skagen, most literature on the Nordic colonies is published in Norwegian and Swedish. An exception is Alexandra Herlitz's 2013 thesis on the Swedish colony at Grez: "Grez-sur-Loing Revisited: The International Colony in a Different Light" (University of Gothenburg). Herlitz explores themes such as national identity, the avant-garde, and the thorny issue of a Grez "style," as well as the extent to which the Scandinavian artists at Grez were able to integrate and network with other nationalities. Indeed, Grez was among the most truly international colonies, attracting artists from Britain, Ireland, America, and even Japan, as well as Scandinavia. Visitors to Grez included R.L. Stevenson, who "discovered" Barbizon and Grez in the mid-1870s,[15] and the Swedish artist, novelist, and playwright August Strindberg, who first stayed there in 1883 and who used the village as the backdrop to his book *Among French Peasants* (1889).[16] The critic Johan Christian Janzon (1853–1910), writing under the pseudonym "Spada," was also there in 1883 and leaves us with a lively account of the community at Grez, published here in English for the first time, alongside a contemporaneous article by Strindberg's wife, the actress Siri von Essen (1850–1912). Herlitz introduces both texts, along with a third by Georg Pauli on the Swedish painter Carl Larsson. A more recent exploration of the artists' colony at Grez, published by the Swedish art historian Torsten Gunnarsson, will appear in a later volume of *Art in Translation*. Indeed, given the plethora of material on Nordic artists' colonies, this volume will focus only on those communities that were active in the 1870s and 1880s. A second volume, published in September 2017, will complete the picture, by including articles on the colonies at Funen, Lysaker, Varberg, and Tuusula that formed in the 1890s and later.

If one includes Frits Thaulow's *plein-air* academy at Modum, near Christiania (Oslo), Norway boasted two colonies in the 1880s, the second being the group headed by Erik Werenskiold, who gathered at Christian and Maggie Skredsvig's Fleskum farm at Baerum, in the summers of 1886 and 1887. Kitty Corbet-Milward introduces an article by Marit Werenskiold that examines the work of Werenskiold, Skredsvig, Harriet Backer, and Kitty Kielland in relation to their embrace of French Naturalism but also in terms of a specifically Norwegian style of Neo-Romantic landscape painting, infused with emotion.

From this brief selection of texts, therefore, it becomes clear that what united these Nordic artists' colonies in the 1880s was a strong sense of community, as well as a firm commitment to naturalism and open-air painting. From the 1890s onward, as I hope to show in the next volume of *Art in Translation*, a more eclectic approach to subject and style emerged,

including a more emotional response to the landscape, an interest in local crafts, and a sense of the home as a work of art. What was evident across all periods, however, was that the artists who worked in these colonies were strongly aware not only of their own national identity, but also of their role within the European avant-garde.

Notes

1. Annika Waenerberg, "In the Open Air: Nordic Paths to Plein-Air Paintings," in Torsten Gunnarsson, *A Mirror of Nature: Nordic Landscape Painting 1840–1910* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2006), 103.
2. On the rise of Danish national identity, see Neil Kent, *The Soul of the North: A Social, Architectural and Cultural History of the Nordic Countries, 1700–1940* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 216–38.
3. Anonymous critic, cited in Michael Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 107. Jacobs incorrectly dates the *Exposition Universelle* to 1877.
4. See E. Becker, D. Jackson, W. Silverman, G. Weisberg, and M. de Haan, *Illusions of Reality: Painting, Photography, Theatre and Cinema, 1875–1918* (Amsterdam: Mercator Fonds/Van Gogh Museum, 2011).
5. Jacobs *Good and Simple Life*, 88.
6. Torsten Gunnarsson, "Grez-sur-Loing och Konstnärskolonierna kring Fontainebleauskogen," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00233609.2014.938114> (accessed May 24, 2017).
7. On the complicated journey to Skagen, see Brian Dudley Barrett, *Artists on the Edge: The Rise of Coastal Artists' Colonies, 1880–1920* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 148–9.
8. For Barrett, Barbizon represents the "prototype" of an artists' colony. See Barrett, *Artists on the Edge*, 107–42.
9. Mathias Hamann, "Im Bankreis des Waldes: Künstlerkolonien um Fontainebleau," in R. Bernhardt et al., *Künstlerkolonien in Europa: im Zeichen der Ebene und des Himmels* (Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2001), 25–39.
10. Will Hicok Low, *A Chronicle of Friendships 1873–1900* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908).
11. Barrett, *Artists on the Edge*, 185.
12. Bergh had also earlier worked alongside Anders Zorn, Ernst Josephson, and Hanna Hirsch at Dalarö, a summer resort southeast of Stockholm, in 1885. See Michelle Facos, *Nationalism and the Nordic Imagination: Swedish Art of the 1890s* (University of California Press, 1998), 89.
13. Patricia G. Berman, *In Another Light: Danish Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2007).

14. Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe 1870–1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
15. Barbizon and Grez are both described by Robert Louis Stevenson in "Forest Notes," first published in the *Cornhill Magazine* (May 1876).
16. August Strindberg, *Bland franska bönder* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1911).